

IMAGES OF RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN ART

Rod Pattenden

One of the aims of this conference is to sponsor a more active relationship between the various forms of artistic expression. It is therefore with some trepidation that I begin this analysis of present themes in the visual arts with a literary reflection.

From the unlikely source of Rudyard Kipling comes this observation on the difficult relationship between religion and the arts:

Our Father Adam, sat under a tree
and scratched with a stick in the mould
And so, the first rude sketch that the world has seen
was joy to his mighty heart.
Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves
It's pretty, But is it art?

The relationship between the visual arts and religion lies in a geography more like a battlefield. Apart from the current debates that belie both fields of study in the aftermath of post-structuralist approaches to theories of knowledge, the relationship between theology and the visual arts has been marked more by a war of images than by peaceful co-operation.

In the Christian tradition there is a deeply held suspicion of the power of images to seduce the imagination to worship the gods of sensual desire. For example, the Council of Elvira in Spain in AD 309 flatly denied the visual arts any place in religious education or ritual. 'There shall be no pictures in churches, lest what is painted on the walls might be worshipped and revered'.⁷¹ This was in accordance with a certain reading of the prohibition of images found in the ten commandments in the Jewish Pentateuch.

This uncertainty is still expressed by religious institutions in the contemporary situation and is clearly exemplified in the history and development of the Blake Prize for Religious Art in Australia.² The most sustained interaction between religion and the arts in Australia has come about through the institution of a Prize for religious art

begun in 1951 and now having just completed its 43rd exhibition in Sydney. The prize was initiated by a committee of clergy, prominent lay people and a group of some of the leading artists in Sydney at the time. The aim of the prize was expressed by one of the key motivators the Jesuit Fr Michael Scott. In the catalogue foreword to the first exhibition in 1951 Scott commented that "Up till now our artists could rightly say that there was little opportunity for exhibiting works of religious nature in this country and even less opportunity for selling them. This exhibition is intended to provide the opportunity for both."

The Blake Prize set out to educate the Church and to provide a market for artists willing to explore religious imagery. It *has* attracted many of the leading artists in Australia. It has *failed* however to appreciatively improve the quality of original art work used in religious institutions.

The great contribution of the Blake Prize lies in its offering of an alternative subject matter at a time when other major prizes favoured the more restrictive subject matter of portraiture or landscape. The Blake Prize has been successful because it garnered the support of many of the leading innovators in Australian painting in the 1950s and 1960s. This support came because of the openness of the subject matter. An impetus that has brought the Blake Prize to crisis several times when winning works have moved away from descriptive narratives of religious dogmas or events.

An analysis of the artworks submitted for the Blake demonstrates some surprising results. Some artists whose works may normally exhibit strong qualities of innovative vision seem constrained by the expectations of religiousness, re-inventing the muted colourings of fresco paintings to convey some religious aura. Alternatively other artists have thrived in exploring a speculative approach to religious subject matter and have shocked the judges and public alike. Artists like John Coburn, Eric Smith and Stanislaus Rapotec for example were all severely criticised for their lack of religious content and yet all three have gone on to develop a large body of work that cannot be described as being other than religious in nature or impulse.

The Blake Prize demonstrates that the visual is a potent form of speculation that is not easily tamed to reinforce verbal dogmas and formulas. Those entrusted with the texts of religion will at times look with suspicion on the iconoclastic, prophetic or apparent destructive tendencies of the visual.

Images bring insight. They make the viewer aware of frames of reference, through acts of censoring, selection, the provision of focus

and the creation of order. Art creates a posture of threat and subversion while holding open the possibility of fresh confirmation about the sensual or metaphysical foundations of human existence.

These brief observations on the Blake Prize lead me to characterise the relationship between religion and the visual arts in the following way.

Art in the service of religion can be described as tending towards two opposite possibilities. Art can fulfil the role of the expositor. It can, in narrative or symbolic language, make present the structures that undergird the form of creeds and doctrines. Visual representation can appear to authorise and make present the effectual power of transcendent persons or qualities. It explains.

On the other extreme art can also provide one with a vibrant means of speculation. This form is exploratory and investigative in nature. It is willing to run risks of either confirming the foundations of the faith or over-turning the power structures of the accepted imagery.

This distinction draws on Paul Ricoeur's understanding of myth in religious systems. Myths are both explanatory and exploratory.³ They give, in narrative or symbolic form, an account of the origins and aspirations of human culture. The category of myth also acknowledges a more holistic relationship between conceptual thinking that is analytical in nature as well as imaginative in expression that involves art objects and rituals associated with that belief system. Myth respects both analytical and imaginative products of human thought. They also allow for the presence of both subject and object in the experience of the religious world-view or myth.

In the visual arts there is also present between these polar possibilities of explanation and exploration a rich vocabulary of parody, irreverence, and humour which dismantles the pomposity and overweight seriousness of religious jargon in the hope of fresh revelation and relevance.

Artists whose work convey interest in subject matter that is religious in nature are usually very careful to distance themselves from religious language that is seen to support an institutional position. They do not want to be servants of institutional ideology nor do they want to sacrifice their work to an external authority.

Many of the artists I have interviewed therefore value their role as speculative and exploratory thinkers. They value the mystical possibilities of human consciousness or the philosophical and

metaphysical implications of their visual investigations.

This is relevant to the crisis that many artists have felt since the 1980s about the social and cultural role of their artistic output. Myths about the prophetic stance of the artist nurtured by the avant-garde have collapsed in the face of the virtually complete commercialisation of the art market. When art is a commodity that can be bought and sold it participates in an economy that minimises its ability to disrupt or question that system. Aboriginal artists, for example, are now confronting the difficult and powerful market forces that render artworks into commercial values. For after all every self respecting politically correct Australian needs to claim some ownership of this new commodity value called 'aboriginality', whether it be in the form of furnishings, t-shirts, or artworks.

Art Historian Terry Smith draws attention to the theme of the artist in crisis in the work of Arthur Boyd during the 1970's. He maintains that artists like Arthur Boyd and Sydney Nolan were responding in their work to a perception that Australian people were looking for a "renewal of social myths - in a word, prophecies".⁴ During the 1970's Boyd painted a series of works of the artist-in-extremis, a response to the toll this expectation has had on the artist and a questioning of the social significance of the artist's role in contemporary society.

In responding to this crisis of relevance it is clear that artists have responded in many different ways, from giving up producing artworks altogether on the one hand or participating in more direct political and disruptive acts on the other. Both extremes declare the loss of belief in the ability of art to renew, change, or challenge social values and practises.

One of the responses to this crisis of purpose has been exemplified by many of the artists I have interviewed who use language that borrows from organised religious systems to authorise their exploration of human issues. Themes of identity, human wholeness, states of consciousness or bodily awareness, issues of justice or cruelty; in all these areas of subject matter many of the artists call upon religious language to describe their role.

The artist as priest. The artist as shaman. The artist as healer or mystic. The artists as revealer. Descriptive terms like these are a feature of how these artists articulate their role, indicative of the attraction of religious subject matter in a period that continues to be one of crisis for artists. Why paint? For whom do I work? etc. These artists are searching for connective evidence of our shared bodily

existence in a universe of retrievable intelligent meaning. In this sense they are speculative theologians, mystics or philosophers. Their work is certainly of prime interest to professional theologians, religious functionaries and to those who develop forms of conceptual and philosophical thinking.

The first artistic project I would like to briefly mention is the recent commissioning of a painting to represent the scene of the Last Supper of Jesus and his Disciples. The Commission by a group within the Uniting Church called for the inclusion of women at the table.⁵

This commission lies more in the area of explanation but with the recognition that images bear power, that images are formative of thought structures and human behaviour. Feminist hermeneutics have alerted art historians to the fact that artworks frame perception.⁶ They draw attention *to* as much as they draw attention *away*. Images define the viewer and constitute an area of reflection. Through this process of definition they also represent power structures.

The Last Supper is a site for exclusion - an all male enclave that lies at the heart of Christian practise. Theologically the Eucharist is a sign of universal inclusion, the meal of eschatological plenitude, and yet the attendant imagery is one reinforcing the power of an all male caste.

The work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault has drawn attention to the way art products are sites of power.⁷ Artworks act to constitute the viewer, to construe possible lines of thought and action. The intention of this project was to image a site for inclusivity. The Last Supper project has drawn alarm, accusations of heresy, of manipulating the tradition as well as comments that confirm the inclusive intentions of the commission.

Moving to the more speculative mode of image making is the work of the artist John Adair who was recently included in the finalists for the Moet and Chandon Prize.⁸

His work exhibits a strong interest in abstraction that has similarities to conventions developed in the late 1960s and 70s which are linked to a form of minimalism where the surface areas of paint and colour were reduced to their material purity. The content and aesthetic interest of the works were in fact the paint and its application.

John Adair has revisited these conventions with a different intent. Drawing on the visual stimulus of having lived in the Bondi Beach area for ten years he has reduced the landscape to a strong interplay between vertical and horizontal forms. It is possible to read them as horizontals of warm sand, cool sea, or the verticals of bodies or buildings. This radical abstraction appears initially to the eye as banal, flat and even boring. This is part of the artist's strategy, to strip away the decorative, the interesting and the entertaining.

Each block of colour appears, as one spends time with the work, to exhibit extremely subtle changes in surface modulation. One appears waxy, another reflects the lights, another exhibits subtle underpainting. Over some ten minutes the work begins to command a rich and monumental arrangement of quite different presences.

John Adair has indicated his interest as stripping away visual phenomena to essentials; an essential that may appear as emptiness or nothingness. He likens that to the emptiness that lies between two people: a space pregnant with possibilities. A way of understanding this work is to draw on the tradition of the *via negativa* in Christian theology. John Adair has read the works of St John of the Cross who bases his mystical descriptions on the God who exists in absence or darkness. John's interest in abstraction is therefore a means to deal with absence. It is the intent of providing visual analogues to the experience of the silence of this space of potential. Abstraction is being used here to explore this emptiness. To scrape away conceptual habits, visual clichés and perceptual paraphernalia. There is however another possibility in abstraction that lies at the other opposite end of this intention.

Abstraction may also be a site for presence. Symbolic or referential means may render abstraction a site for memory, or bodily awareness or as an icon or window to transcendence.

Janet Laurence is an artist whose work evidences these interests. She draws attention to the materials making one aware of memory of substances. She likens her task to that of the alchemist who is aware of the metaphysical properties of the materials and who achieves in the conjuring of these substances to create metaphors for transcendence and an awareness of the spiritual in human sensibilities. The notion of alchemy attracts her as she says 'Because it was before the 'reason' of science, alchemy doesn't acknowledge the separation between mind and body. It still embodied those links in its philosophy'.⁹

Janet Laurence uses a variety of materials including various metals, wood and lighting elements. She manipulates the materials by burning, or the creation of ash and the application of corrosive chemicals to the surface. These create memories in the viewer and become metaphors for transformation. These works require a heightened sensual awareness to surface qualities and forms. They evoke the use of touch taste and sight and even smell. This sensual awareness is part of the process of broadening the categories of perception and to constitute the viewer as a person aware of the spiritual dimension of human existence. In an age of instant gratification and technological advancement the artist is concerned to restore to the viewer a greater participation in the process of interacting with the art work and therefore with their own perceptual awareness.

A further development in an abstract approach to religious content is to push the sensual and physical possibilities of the materials to make present the human transactions present in both the subject and object.

Marion Borgelt in her ensemble pieces evokes the sensual remembrance of other presences through flesh, taste and touch. They constitute the viewer as a body. But the body in a heightened state of awareness that is aware of energies, relationships, and meanings that seemingly impinge on bodily existence and rational decision-making. This is a search for essences and meanings that uses bodily awareness as means for understanding. She says "I want to get to the core of things - not to get lost in the decorative, the peripheral or the superfluous but to find the core".¹⁰

As part of that intention she rejects the tradition of representation that she sees being so much a part of a male dominated imagery. Her search has been for a prehistory that represents essences. She says "human beings are a manifestation of infinite source material". And again "we are complex energy".

In symbolic structures like spirals, ovals, triangles etc. she is trying to draw on bodily memories of a primal nature that connects human beings to the structure of the universe. The art is therefore religious in nature placing the viewer in the position of a wider definition of what constitutes the human and in relationship to the development and structure of the universe. The work is sensual, seductive, suggestive. It lies on the edge of recognition without declaring its content. It is potent and full. It is heavy with possibilities.

Modes of representation and abstraction are being explored in this short survey to demonstrate a continued interest in religious issues and phenomena. Religion in its intention is world building. It seeks to connect the individual to an awareness of meanings that structure and give form to social and natural phenomena. These artists have used various strategies to develop a body of work that in like manner constitute the viewer as one with an interest in religious questions and that speak of fundamental structures of human existence.

Institute for Theology and the Arts, Sydney

REFERENCES

1. Samuel Laeuchli, Religion and Art in Conflict (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p.57.
2. Rosemary Crumlin, The Blake Prize for Religious Art - the First 25 Years (Monash, 1984).
3. Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.5.
4. Terry Smith in Bernard Smith, Australian Painting 1788 -1990, 3rd edition, (Melbourne: OUP, 1991), p.459.
5. Judi Fisher and Janet Wood (eds), A Place at the Table: Women at the Last Supper (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1993).
6. Margaret Miles, Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
7. Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Brian Wallis (ed), Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp.417-432.
8. See also the catalogue of the Moet and Chandon Touring Exhibition 1994, Moet and Chandon Australian Art Foundation, 1994.
9. Interview with the artist.
10. Interview with the artist.